

Superintendent of Public Instruction Dr. Tony Bennett

2011 STATE OF EDUCATION ADDRESS

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Educators, students, parents, fellow Hoosiers, thank you yet again for this opportunity to speak to you directly in this format. One year ago, I stood before you to offer Indiana's first State of Education Address.

The fact this office now has the privilege to address educators and citizens this way speaks to the increased attention to educational issues—and the elevated priority of ensuring our children have the type of high-quality education they deserve.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described education reform as America's next great moon shot. Education issues are at the forefront of public debate. Political will is growing at the state level to improve the outdated systems that—unaddressed—have allowed American schools to stagnate while our global competitors passed us by.

Today, America's children are beginning to see the benefits of an education reform movement. Indiana has positioned itself as the nation's education reform leader. In the last year, our state's lawmakers pursued and achieved the most comprehensive education agenda in the United States.

In the education space race, Indiana has achieved lift off.

We took advantage of a sincere public desire for change. We approached our system of schools from every angle—addressing the persistent problems and challenges.

Because of our efforts this year, teachers like Spencer Lloyd—choir director at Manual High School in Indianapolis—will have peace of mind knowing their efforts are rewarded and their positions are safe. You heard Mr. Lloyd's students welcome us all with song tonight.

He has faced pink slips multiple times in the past several years—not because he's ineffective—but because he has fewer years under his belt than other teachers in the building. Moving forward, when reduction-in-force decisions become necessary, those decisions will be based on performance—and not just the number of years a teacher has been in the classroom. This is critically important to the success of Indiana students, because they all deserve great teachers like Spencer Lloyd.

Now, all teachers and principals will receive annual evaluations that are multi-faceted, fair and that consider student performance and growth. Because of this reform, those teachers who make the biggest difference in children's lives will receive the recognition they deserve—through salary increases and job security.

Now, teachers like Stacy McCormack and Byron Ernest—both Indiana Teachers of the Year, will be recognized for their work. No longer will the most effective teacher in a school be treated the same as the least effective.

Now, we can recognize schools and educators driving dramatic gains in student learning, like Arlington Woods Elementary School, right here in Indianapolis. Arlington serves some of our most disadvantaged students—where teachers like Tammy Laughner and Dan Kriech help classrooms full of children achieve impressive academic growth.

Now school leaders, like Warren Township Superintendent Peggy Hinkley, will have increased flexibility to place educators and develop programs that are predicated on what is best for the students in their buildings.

Because of our efforts this year, parents like Oneita Johnson have more quality options for their children. Nida, who joins us tonight in the audience, is a single mother raising three children. She is putting one through college now. The other two are participating in the Choice Scholarship Program. Nida felt her sons' needs were not met in the traditional public school setting, and when she moved them to a charter school without much improvement, she felt she had few, if any, options.

The scholarships give Nida's family the opportunity to send two of her sons—Myles and Kevin, to a private school she believes best fits their needs. She says her sons are more engaged in their learning than ever before, and she looks forward to watching them grow academically in the year ahead.

Nida's story brings home another great point: When it comes to educational options, just having more choices isn't enough. Those choices must be quality.

With that in mind, Indiana has increased expectations for Indiana's charter schools and will now hold all schools—charters, traditional public, and choice scholarship schools—to high standards of accountability.

When you give families the freedom to choose the best possible school for their child and you provide educators in all settings the tools and support they need to level the playing field—all students will benefit.

Twelve years after it took effect, we are enforcing the measures mandated under the state's accountability law to turn around our chronically underperforming schools. This year, seven schools hit their sixth consecutive year of Academic Probation. And the State Board of Education acted to intervene with carefully placed turnaround operators at five schools—and lead partners to offer support in two others.

This is new ground for our state. We have never before tackled such challenging issues in our underperforming schools. Community input and engagement will be crucial for improvement, and we are currently holding meetings in each of these communities to listen to concerns and answer important questions regarding what lies ahead.

Most of these schools were, at one time, centers of their communities that provided an excellent education to students. Our goal moving forward is to restore that same level of community engagement and student excellence.

Central to our turnaround efforts is the belief that all students—regardless of their race, ZIP code, or economic circumstances—can learn and deserve access to quality educational opportunities.

Demography is not destiny. Addressing our underperforming schools is some of the most important work we have tackled for Indiana's students this year.

And finally, we took steps to align education spending and education policy. This biennial budget provides an increase in per-pupil funding for all students—at a time when states across the nation are still slashing their budgets.

At 55 percent of our state's general fund, Indiana spends more of its budget on education than anything else. But, we know from experience that adding more money to the existing system won't yield better results. Instead, we must do more to better manage the money we already spend.

Efforts to do more with our money should start right here. This year, our department reorganized to support the implementation of new laws and provide local school districts more effective services and assistance.

I am proud to say, when you look at the number of students we serve, Indiana does more to serve its students with less department staff than any other state education agency in the country. And this year, we used funds saved within the department to reward schools across the state for increasing their graduation rates.

Here's another great example of spending money where it counts: Gov. Mitch Daniels finished the full-day kindergarten grant, giving school corporations the ability to offer more students this important early childhood opportunity.

This year, about 13,000 more students will take advantage of full day kindergarten programs because of this increased grant funding. Since 2005, the number of students benefiting from this grant has jumped from 10,000 students to almost 70,000 students this year.

And schools across the state are finding creative ways to drive more dollars to the classroom. In Bartholomew County, at no charge to the school corporation, Cummins performed a financial audit that saved millions of dollars for the district; turning a budget shortfall into a budget surplus while allowing more money to flow into classrooms. And they did it without touching the district's instructional staff.

Under a provision in the state budget, schools will now have access to business experts, like those at Cummins, who can identify savings and help schools spend their money where it has the biggest impact—on innovative programs and classroom instruction.

The landscape of Indiana's schools is now one that embraces freedom, competition and accountability.

Freedom for ALL parents to choose and for school leaders to innovate and reward their best educators. Competition to inspire dramatic innovation and increase academic offerings. Accountability for all—students, teachers, parents, principals and districts—to ensure continued improvement.

Change of this magnitude, and significance, is rarely an easy undertaking. President Ronald Reagan once spoke of painting a nation with “a banner of bold, unmistakable colors, with no pastel shades.” Everything our state has accomplished for students this year has been as vibrant.

When I took office in 2009, I set three clear and very high goals. First, at least 90 percent of Indiana’s students will graduate from high school with a meaningful diploma. Second, at least 25 percent of students will take and pass Advanced Placement exams or International Baccalaureate exams—or earn college credit during their high school years. Third, 90 percent of students will pass both the English/Language Arts and Math portions of the state’s ISTEP exam.

When it comes to setting high expectations for student performance, it’s hard to disagree. Who doesn’t want better outcomes for our kids? Make no mistake, getting there is not easy, but getting there is exactly what we committed to do—and it’s what our children need and deserve.

And while we’re still far from achieving our lofty goals for Indiana students, already we’re seeing positive results.

We’ve seen steady ISTEP gains since 2009. Indiana’s students increased their scores for the second year in a row, with 70.2 percent of students now passing both Math and English portions of the exam: A gain of five percentage points since 2008-2009 and the highest number in state history.

Our Advanced Placement gains were the best in the nation with the number of students passing these challenging exams increasing by two percentage points—bringing the total to 12 percent of our students.

I am especially proud to say Indiana is now leading the nation in providing minority students access to these advanced classes.

And when it comes to our graduation rate, more high school seniors are graduating than ever before—nearly 85 percent.

Most recently, we were able to announce Indiana’s schools recorded their best performance ever under the state’s current accountability metrics. A record 775 schools earned an A for their academic performance.

This was the first year schools received letter grades for their placement, as opposed to the outdated and confusing category labels we’ve used since the state’s accountability law went into effect in 1999.

The move to A through F letter grades shines increased light on school performance for parents and community members. And—in my opinion—many of our schools have a lot to brag about. In all, more than 50 percent of the state's 1,850 schools earned As and Bs under the new labeling system.

This is progress. I credit not only the students and their parents—but especially the work of Indiana's great teachers and school leaders. I have spent my life as an educator: I have been a science teacher, a coach, a principal, assistant superintendent, district superintendent, and now I am honored to serve all educators and all students as your superintendent of public instruction.

One of the great pleasures of this job is a daily reminder of the influence educators have in the lives of their students. Being an educator is arguably the most important and honorable job one can hold. Indiana is blessed to have so many great men and women serving the cause of our future generations. Our state's students and educators continue to rise to every occasion, and I am proud and grateful for their efforts.

We have achieved lift off, and we're heading in the right direction. But we must not stop now.

As new laws take effect and our schools adjust to the changing landscape, working together will be key. And so will optimism and resolve. School leaders must embrace and use their new flexibility. Teachers must welcome and engage in new evaluation and professional development programs. And communities must continue to demand excellence from themselves and their schools.

Our focus on underachieving schools is echoed by U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, who has called for all states to take action to improve the lowest 5 percent of schools.

Consider this, the seven schools currently facing intervention in Indiana represent a fraction of a percent. This speaks to the need for increased expectations under the law. And we will move to give entire districts—not just schools—letter grades and consequences under the state's accountability law.

Underperforming schools, as we've learned through recent turnaround efforts, are often the result of deeply rooted, systemic problems at the district level.

We'll also trace educator performance back to the teacher preparation programs that train them—encouraging better, more relevant program offerings and competition.

Most important, state leaders must take steps to accelerate the timeframe for state support and intervention. It shouldn't take six consecutive years for us to give these schools the support they need.

We must be even more committed to preparing all Indiana children for success in college and their careers. We must meet all kids where they are—and find the right instructional method and the right pathway that will lead them to success.

In the months ahead, Indiana will take important steps to align K-12 and higher education—so that when students graduate from high school, they do so with a degree that allows them to dive into postsecondary work without remediation.

Indiana is leading a group of states to develop improved assessments for grades 3 through 11. We are working to implement college-and-career readiness assessments that are technology based. These tests will begin in the elementary grades and build from there to transition students to their postsecondary experience. At the classroom level, these tests will tell educators which students need more help—and which are ready for more challenging work.

Already, there are local school districts leading the way in implementing these college and career ready assessments. Fort Wayne Community Schools is using the SAT and ACT tests to inform instruction and target student intervention.

Whether they leave our school buildings for universities or other post-secondary training, every Indiana student will be ready to take advantage of well-paying, 21st century career opportunities.

If there is one common trait of every extraordinary teacher I've met, it is this: Great teachers innovate. They use technology and ingenuity to reach students with engaging lessons that grab every student's attention and inspire them to solve problems and build their own understanding of content.

In Indiana, we will put more of these great teachers in front of more students by expanding choice. We will increase the number of high quality charter schools with a newly established Indiana Charter School Board.

We will give schools flexibility to explore alternative delivery methods, like online learning—so that even students in places with fewer resources have access to the very best instruction.

Districts like Wayne Township, under the leadership of Superintendent Jeff Butts, have taken the lead. This year, Wayne Township became the first school corporation in Indiana to open a public online school—adding to the growing number of online options in our state.

To make sure students are prepared for the technology they will face in college and the workforce, we will ask the general assembly to require every student to take online coursework before graduating from high school.

But we must do more to encourage innovation. We must revise the old ways of thinking about school and teaching that confine student learning to a grade. Instead, we must shift to a focus on mastery of content—not grade level.

Students ready for grade-level math—but not prepared for grade-level English—should have all their needs met in the same classroom. This fundamental shift is mirrored in Indiana's third-grade reading legislation, which requires third graders to master third-grade reading content before moving on to fourth-grade reading instruction.

Finally, we must better align education funding and education policy. Next year, the department will urge state lawmakers to approve multiple count dates to inform school funding.

Currently, schools receive state money based on a single student count date early in the school year. Shifting to several count days throughout the year will ensure schools are funded more

equitably and that decisions are made in the best interests of students. Money must follow children to whichever school they attend.

In one year, Indiana has dramatically transformed its education landscape. We did this because we could no longer accept a system that didn't prepare our children to compete with their national and global peers.

So, we set high expectations for student performance. And we set high expectations for the teachers and leaders responsible for educating them.

From there, we pushed for policy that would support both students and educators by promoting flexibility and accountability and establishing a system that encourages excellence.

We increased options for all families and we took steps to make sure those options were of the highest quality.

We did all of this to reach our goals for Hoosier students—those 90-25-90 goals I mentioned earlier in my remarks.

Indiana took this education space race seriously. So far, we are in the lead. Now it's our job to accelerate that winning position.

And we will continue to do so by painting education reform with bold, vibrant colors.

Looking ahead, we have a lot of ground to cover if we hope to truly give our students the education they deserve. But we have put in place a system that supports excellence and continued growth.

And if we succeed in using the new tools we now have to better educate students, the gains we've made so far will seem minimal—and Indiana student performance will truly be the best in the nation and on par with the most competitive nations in the world. And that must be our ultimate goal for the children of this state.

Thank you for your time and attention. I look forward to our work for Indiana students in the weeks, months, and years ahead.